

Chapter 11

Sustaining Downtown



PERSONAL VISION STATEMENTS

“Diverse City Center with living/working/entertainment, easy public transportation, retail restaurants, arts.”

“A downtown city center that provides jobs, taxes, and is the center of business and cultural facilities for the whole region.”

| GOALS | POLICIES FOR DECISION MAKERS |
|--|---|
| Downtown is a thriving, mixed use center of business, employment, institutions, and government. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build on downtown’s economic strengths as a center of health care, higher education, finance, and professional and technical services. |
| Downtown is also a neighborhood that people in the city and the region experience as a safe, fun, and exciting place to live. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to strengthen downtown as a lively residential neighborhood. • Support a residential marketing plan to attract, young professionals, downtown employees, and new hires with targeted messages. |
| Downtown has a diverse and contemporary mix of cultural, arts and entertainment venues that make Birmingham a center of urban southern culture and lifestyle. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to strengthen downtown as the region’s center of culture, the arts, and entertainment. |
| Downtown is made up of connected and mutually reinforcing districts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to strengthen the pedestrian-friendly character of downtown. • Ensure strengthened connections for transit, pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorist between north and south, and linking downtown and adjacent districts. • Advocate for state support for the rerouting of I-20/I-59 north of the BJCC area. • Support a two-way street system for downtown. • Support new zoning for downtown districts to streamline approvals for desired development. |
| Downtown has a strong leadership organization active in planning, promotion, recruitment, development, and public realm improvements. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support a consistent financing plan for REV Birmingham (REV). • Continue to work on implementation of the 2004 Center City Master Plan, with updating and adjustments as appropriate. • Review downtown neighborhood organization boundaries in light of the growing number of downtown residents. |

findings

Downtown is a key employment center within the city, with approximately one-third of total city employment, and UAB is the largest single downtown employer by a large margin.

During the past 10 years, downtown industries experiencing the greatest growth were health care, higher education, real estate rental and leasing, and “other services” (primarily religious, grantmaking, civic, and professional organizations).

Industries experiencing the largest decline were utilities, manufacturing, information, and wholesale trade.

Compared to the rest of the Birmingham MSA, downtown has particularly high concentrations of employment in health care, higher education, government, information, professional, technical and scientific services, utilities, and finance and insurance.

REV Birmingham has undertaken a number of initiatives to strengthen downtown, including marketing and business recruitment, small business financing, district planning, and a business retention program.

The City Action Partnership, a nonprofit organization funded by downtown property owners, works in partnership with government, businesses, residents and the Birmingham Police Department to improve safety and the perception of safety downtown.

Downtown had an estimated 8,900 residents in 2010, an increase of 31 percent over 2000.

The housing stock is predominantly rental.

Residential occupancy rates are very high—99 percent for rental units and 93 percent for owner-occupied units—indicating strong demand (early 2012).

Downtown’s collection of historic buildings is unique to the region and the state.

Investment and activity downtown is fragmented, with numerous small revitalization areas, tending to give the impression of less activity than is the case.

The 2004 City Center Master Plan has been partially implemented.

challenges

Continuing need to change perceptions of public safety.

Filling vacant ground floor with active uses to link activity areas.

Attracting new uses to vacant and derelict buildings and vacant lots.

Retaining “graduates” of the Innovation Depot in downtown.

Expanding and diversifying housing options in a difficult economic climate.

Creating more amenities needed to create a 24-hour community.

Improving transportation choice, especial transit service, in downtown to serve residents, commuters and visitors.

Enhancing all types of connections between activity and reinvestment areas.

A. What the Community Said

- Downtown districts still seem disconnected.
- Not enough attractions to get enough people out on the street.
- “Two downtowns:” west and east of 18th Street; daytime and night time.
- Connect downtown activity centers with transit, especially the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Center (BJCC) entertainment area and Five Points South, and connect downtown to the rest of the city and region with transit.
- Pursue alternatives to the I-20/59 elevated highway to connect the BJCC area with the rest of downtown.
- Implement the two-way street system recommended in the 2004 City Center Master Plan and confirmed by a 2010 feasibility study.
- Brand downtown districts and improve wayfinding.
- Enhance the pedestrian friendly character of downtown, especially to provide safe, well-lit, and appealing pedestrian routes between entertainment and activity centers.
- Continue supporting housing development and promote condominium development.
- Provide incentives for property renovation, mixed use development, and historic preservation.

HOW IS “DOWNTOWN” DEFINED?

For the purposes of this chapter, downtown Birmingham encompasses the area between 11th Avenue North, from the entertainment district under construction in 2012 surrounding the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Center at the north to Highland Avenue to the south, including the Five Points South entertainment district. The east and west boundaries are Red Mountain Expressway and I-65 respectively, with the Sloss Furnaces Historic Site and the Lakeview neighborhood adjacent to the southeast quadrant functioning in some ways as extensions of downtown.

WHAT MAKES A DOWNTOWN SUCCESSFUL?

- Great places to live, work and play.
 - A mixture of uses.
 - Walkability, with lively and safe streets.
 - Multiple activity generators within walking distance of one another.
 - Entertainment as a driving market segment.
 - Strong residential neighborhoods downtown and in adjacent neighborhoods.
 - Safety and security.
 - Broad public/private investment in downtown’s future.
 - Citizen pride in downtown.
- Provide incentives for businesses to locate downtown.
 - Attract more retail businesses, particularly grocery stores.
 - Increase cultural attractions and other evening activities.
 - Enhance lighting and other security measures.
 - Provide affordable space for business-startups and retain start-ups when they expand.
 - Plan and promote space for Innovation Depot “graduates” in downtown.
 - Streamline the development process while protecting planning and design principles.

B. Recommendations

Downtown Birmingham is the economic, employment, civic, cultural, entertainment and historic heart of the entire metropolitan region. Some 80,000 people come to work in downtown Birmingham every day and an estimated 8,900 residents called downtown home in 2010.

DOWNTOWN MANAGEMENT

REV Birmingham (REV) is a public-private partnership that has been leading downtown development since 1957 under the name Operation New Birmingham. REV is downtown’s urban planner; information



clearinghouse; packager of financial incentives and loans; and promoter. REV is funded by contributions from business and government. In 2012, ONB and Birmingham Main Streets merged, giving the combined organization a broader mission to include commercial revitalization outside downtown and the new name.

City Action Partnership (CAP) is funded by a property tax assessment on 96 blocks of downtown to provide security and cleanliness. Since it began operation in 1996, crime has dropped 62%.

REAL ESTATE MARKET CONDITIONS

Nonresidential space. Downtown (including Lakeview) has approximately 5 million square feet of office space. The office occupancy rate as of the third quarter of 2012 was 84% with an average gross rental rate of about \$21 per square foot for Class A buildings.¹ Occupancy will increase due to recent rental of space at the Regions Plaza building. Industrial and retail real estate data is not broken down at the level of downtown.

Knowledgeable observers report that one of the major issues downtown is that many vacant buildings are not actively marketed, require extensive renovation, or have unrealistic rents for their condition.

Residential space. According to a survey by REV of downtown residential developments, demand for residential space in 2011 was very strong, with 99% of rentals leased and 93% of condos sold. Unit types most in demand are small efficiency or one-bedroom units at modest rents (\$700–900 per month), but they are also the most difficult to produce from a financial point of view. This indicates that households most interested in living downtown are typically young singles or couples with modest incomes. UAB employees and students likely are a prominent element of this demand.

¹ Cushman & Wakefield, *MarketBeat Office Snapshot: Birmingham, AL, Q3 2012*. This is for their “CBD” market area, which includes all of downtown Birmingham plus Lakeview.

THE TWELVE-STEP PROGRAM FOR DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

In 2005, real estate developer and researcher Chris Leinberger identified twelve steps to revitalize downtowns.² In Birmingham, many of these steps are completed or ongoing, but there are some areas that still need work. It is important to note that creating a critical mass of downtown residents is the essential ingredient and lays the foundation for a self-sustaining downtown, which typically takes 20 years to attain.

STEP 1 Capture the Vision and STEP 2 Develop a Strategic Plan. Birmingham’s City Center Plan of 2004 fulfilled both of these steps and is still useful, though with modifications, eight years later as this comprehensive plan is being prepared. The City Center Master Plan identified five principles for revitalization:

- Build on strengths.
- Enhance connections and gateways.
- Develop “green streets,” making key corridors tree-lined.
- Reorganize the highway and street network.
- Strengthen and expand residential neighborhoods.

STEP 3 Forge a Healthy Private/Public Partnership. REV Birmingham has been Birmingham’s downtown leadership organization and partnership for fifty years. Leinberger’s focus on what makes a “healthy” partnership is on ensuring that the private sector leads while the public sector supports. Another aspect of a healthy partnership is ensuring a consistent and adequate funding source for the organization to be effective. This has been problematic for REV Birmingham in recent years.

STEP 4 Make the Right Thing Easy. Development regulations should promote mixed-use development and restore the historic right-of-way fabric downtown. Leinberger notes:

“over the years, streets as freeways (one way streets meant to encourage automobile speed), streets as regional malls (streets closed off to traffic), and streets as on-ramps became ubiquitous fads. Restoring the original street right-of-way fabric, including tight corner turning radiuses, will bring back one of downtowns major assets

² “Turning Around Downtown: Twelve Steps to Downtown Revitalization,” (2005) Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu.

and help re-create the walkable urbanism these cities were designed for.”

Although a study confirmed that return to two-way streets is feasible, it has not been implemented.

Birmingham has adopted the 2009 International Building Code, which makes adaptive reuse of older buildings easier. The development permitting process, however, involves many steps and could be streamlined somewhat with more transparent and explicit zoning and design standards.

STEP 5 Establish Business Improvement Districts and Other Non-Profits. Consistent funding for downtown organizations and revitalization nonprofits is essential, so that they do not have to rely on basic funding for foundation grants or variable government subsidies. This is often accomplished through Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) or similar organizations. BIDs typically combine a leadership role in managing implementation of the downtown strategy with an operational role to keep downtown safe, clean, active, and with a good image—all of these roles being funded through an assessment on downtown property that is collected with property tax. In Birmingham, there are two organizations, REV and City Action Partnership (CAP), and only the “safe and clean” function performed by CAP is supported by the assessment, which is 1/1000 of fair market value and has not been increased since the program began in 1995. REV does not have a consistent funding source.

Other nonprofit organizations often found in downtown revitalization districts include parking authorities, affordable housing developers, and organizations focused on space for artists to live, work, and exhibit. Birmingham’s Parking Authority manages nearly 9,000 parking spaces in garages and two surface parking lots and is funded completely by parking revenues. At present it is required by law to return any funds not used by operations to the City. Parking fees are low for a downtown: from \$3 a day in surface lots to \$8 a day in garages (monthly fees range from a little more than \$1 a day to \$3.50 a day). In some cities, the parking authority is a source of regular funding for downtown leadership organizations.

STEP 6 Create a Catalytic Development Company. A catalytic developer is a redevelopment organization that undertakes the initial projects that other developers see as too risky or for which they have difficulty getting financing. This role is often played by a redevelopment authority, but there are also examples of private corporations organized to be “double bottom line” investors with “patient capital.” Typically, these organizations assemble land, prepare land for development (through environmental assessment and cleanup, for example), provide gap financing, and sometimes develop buildings from start to finish.

New development in downtown Birmingham has already demonstrated success, so a catalytic development corporation is not needed to just show that projects can be successful. However, an entity is lacking that can assemble and prepare sites, provide financing for key infill sites, and assist with particularly costly rehabilitation projects or with projects in emerging districts.

The Community Foundation has created the Community Catalyst Funds to invest in the city center. The Catalyst Funds will seek opportunities to invest in Birmingham’s City Center and across the region.

As part of REV Birmingham’s expanding role as a partner to the City of Birmingham in economic and community development, the organization’s leadership has approved the goal of becoming a catalytic development corporation. This goal builds on ONB’s 2012 merger with Main Streets Birmingham, which has already played a development role in several Birmingham neighborhoods. REV Birmingham is seeking the resources to take on this new responsibility.

STEP 7 Create an Urban Entertainment District. Entertainment creates a destination. Birmingham has continued to be the region’s cultural capital and will have two entertainment districts, at the north and south limits of downtown, Five Points South and the new Uptown Entertainment District in the BJCC area. Additional centers of entertainment have already emerged along 2nd Avenue North and in Lakeview (at the Pepper Place area, 7th Avenue South and 29th Street), and more investment in the Theater District would create yet another small district. The challenge here is to connect these areas

CATALYTIC DEVELOPMENT FUNDING CORPORATION OF NORTHERN KENTUCKY

The Catalytic Development Funding Corporation (CDFC) was established in 2007 to invest and leverage funds for urban development in Northern Kentucky. CDFC raised \$10 million in investment by 2012 (during the Great Recession) from the following banks, corporations, and nonprofits:

- PNC Bank: \$2.5 million
- Bank of Kentucky: \$1 million
- Central Bank: \$1 million
- Corporex: \$1 million
- Duke Energy: \$1 million
- First Financial Bank: \$1 million
- U.S. Bank: \$1 million
- Fifth Third Community Development Corporation: \$1 million
- The Carol Ann and Ralph Haile U.S. Bank Foundation: \$500,000

CDFC’s goal is to raise \$20 million as a revolving fund to assemble land, recruit qualified developers, provide gap financing, and invest in projects with long-term, low-interest loans. The investors expect to receive a modest return on investment.

CDFC has a long term goal of a \$500,000 operating budget, of which it has raised half. The Fund also received a \$10,000 grant from the national community development nonprofit, LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation) and has applied for certification as an emerging Certified Development Financial Institution (CDFI), which will qualify the Fund for grants and make it easier for lending institutions to invest in the Catalytic Fund.

www.vision2015.org/FocusAreas/UrbanRenaissance.aspx

because Birmingham’s various entertainment options are either too distant from one another to walk, or the walk is through a dead zone of empty ground floor spaces. Leinberger notes:

“the most important benefit of entertainment is to get ‘feet on the street,’ especially at night. And just as a crowded restaurant is the best recommendation that it is a good place, crowded sidewalks recommend downtown, signaling a safe environment, and providing an excitement and spectacle that draws people to the area.”

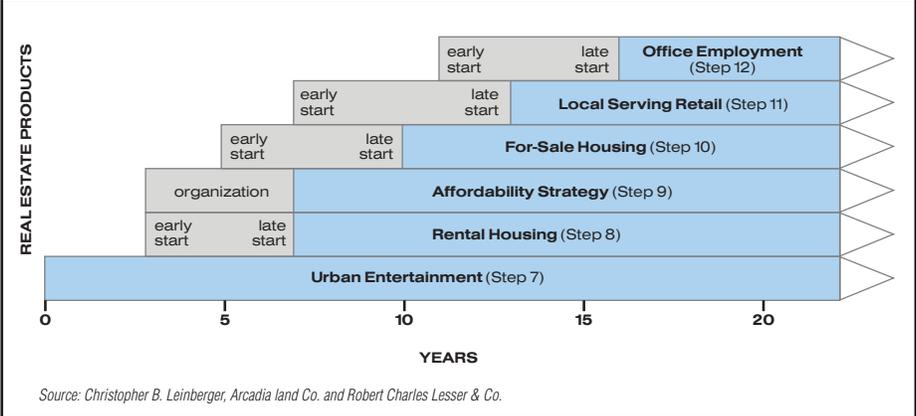
In Birmingham, the distance between activities, too many dead zones, and the prevalence of valet parking services tend to keep people off the sidewalks.

STEP 8 Develop a Rental Housing Market. Downtown Birmingham’s 99% rental occupancy rate and waiting list for units indicates that this step has been successfully completed. The challenge now is to provide more units to meet demand in what is still a challenging market for financing.

STEP 9 Pioneer an Affordability Strategy. Park Place, the mixed-income HOPE VI development, is the only new housing development downtown with an explicit affordability strategy. However, affordability should be conceptualized as more than a public housing or low-income housing tax credit strategy. As the housing market analysis in the 2004 City Center Master Plan noted:

“Each new residential development could contain a percentage of affordable housing units, ranging from 10 to 25 percent. However, for mixed income development to be financially and socially successful over the long term, the affordable units must be dispersed and indistinguishable in design and materials from the market rate units.”

FIGURE 11.1: DOWNTOWN REAL ESTATE STRATEGY TIME CHART



In 2012, realtors and developers reported strong demand for studio and one-bedroom units at \$700-\$900 a month, but the cost of rehabilitation of older buildings is typically too big to sustain those rents. This is where the availability of gap financing, as discussed under Step 6, could make a difference. Moreover, projects with small units, or basic renovation of empty or underutilized light industrial or warehouse buildings could meet that demand. UAB, including the Medical Center, could include employer-assisted workforce housing for low- and moderate-income employees and affiliates in its housing strategy for downtown.

STEP 10 Focus on For-Sale Housing. Birmingham has entered the stage of providing more for-sale housing. Empty nesters and retirees tend to be the major target markets.

STEP 11 Develop a Local-Serving Retail Strategy. The “retail follows rooftops” maxim is particularly true for local-serving retail in reviving downtowns. However, the food business is undergoing a transition. Grocery stores and big box retail are looking for new models after their decades-long expansion into bigger and bigger stores with ever-larger parking lots combined with the rise of internet shopping. Traditional supermarkets are losing out to small-format grocery stores and to economy stores like Dollar General, which are now selling food. Recruiting the right mix of retailers for downtown will be important. The Pizitz building project is slated to include a local specialty grocer. A focus should be given to the development of food retailers that combine online and bricks and mortar stores, like the Birmingham startup Freshfully, which opened its first store in Avondale.

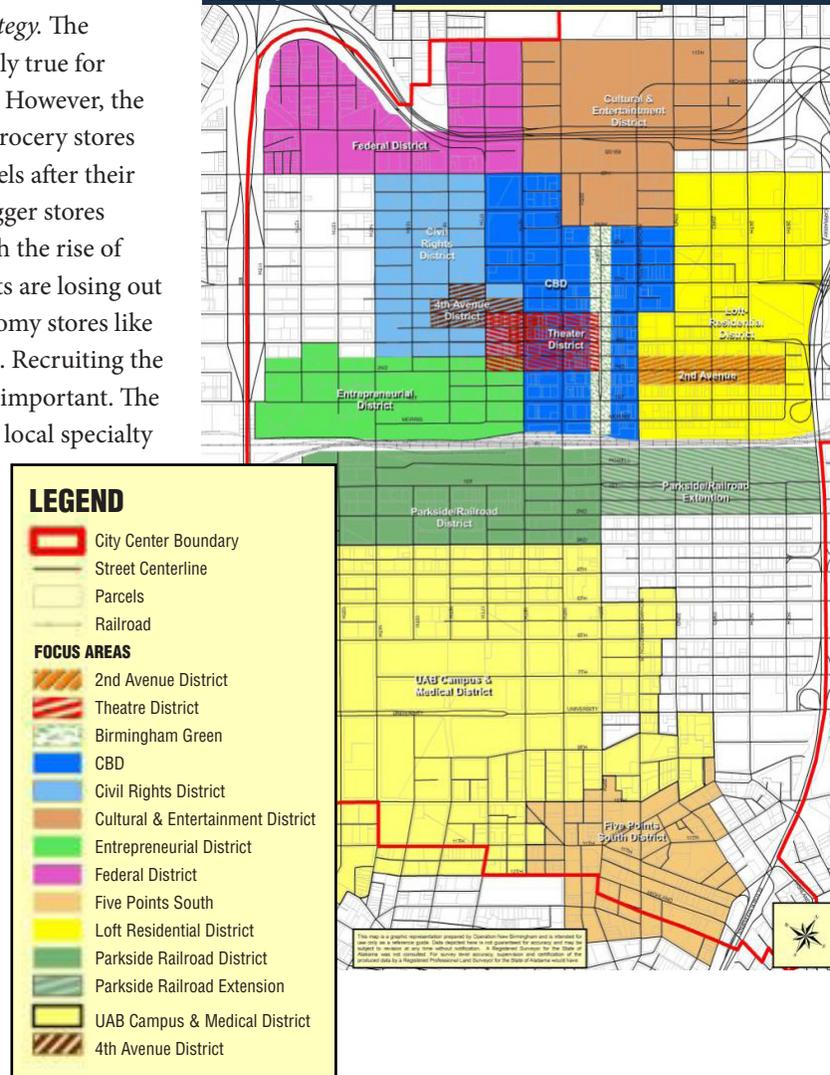
STEP 12 Re-create a Strong Office Market. Downtown Birmingham remains the favored location for some traditional office-based sectors like finance and law, and occupancy rates for Class A buildings are high. At the same time, the federal government’s commitment to a smart growth policy of locating federal offices in urban centers has resulted in

the location of major federal offices in distressed parts of downtown: FBI, ATF and DEA offices just north of the BJCC; a large, new, LEED-certified building for the Social Security Administration northwest of Kelly Ingram Park; and a new building for Treasury Department offices across from the Social Security Building at 14th Street North and Rev. Abraham Woods, Jr. Boulevard.

DOWNTOWN SUBDISTRICTS

Downtown is made up of a set of subdistricts, as shown in the REV Birmingham map of focus areas. Although not located in downtown, the adjacent Lakeview area, sometimes called a “design district” is associated with downtown, as is the Sloss Furnaces Historic Site. Each of the subdistricts shown on the map has areas of activity and recent, new or planned redevelopment and activity.

FIGURE 11.2: REV BIRMINGHAM—CITY CENTER FOCUS AREAS



Cultural and Entertainment (North):

Opened in 2013, a 300-room Westin Hotel and 60,000 square foot restaurant and entertainment district, known as Uptown, is aimed at revitalizing the convention center district, supporting the convention business, attracting regional visitors, and connecting the convention center district more effectively to the rest of downtown. Other projects in this area include:

- The Alabama School of Fine Arts \$10M Performance Network project provides a 500-seat performance hall available for community and arts organization use.
- Demolition and redevelopment or renovation of Boutwell Auditorium, which needs at least \$4 million for repair and updating, is listed for phase 1 of the 2012 capital improvement bond.
- The Museum of Art is seeking to expand, but there is no specific plan as of this writing.

Loft District and 2nd Avenue:

This district was identified in the City Center Master Plan and has seen rental and condo development as well as the emergence of a thriving restaurant and business district on 2nd Avenue.

Theater District:

The Theater District is a small area of several blocks that contains the Alabama Theatre, the Carver Theatre (Jazz Hall of Fame), the IMAX Theatre at the McWane Science Center, Red Mountain Cabaret Theatre, and the Lyric Theatre, which still needs restoration. Activities supporting revitalization of this area include:

- EPA workshop in 2012 to assist Birmingham Landmarks, Inc., which owns both the Alabama and the Lyric Theaters, the Friends of the Lyric Theater, and other stakeholders in a workshop on removing toxic materials during renovation.
- Bond funding to match private fundraising to restore the Lyric Theater, which has undergone minor renovations, has been approved. In anticipation of bond sales, the City has approved a contribution of \$500,000 for the restoration project.

- Planning for redevelopment of the Pizitz Building renovation is underway, with a planned food market on the ground floor.

Central Business District:

The Central Business District has remained stable, with limited office vacancies and an average gross rental rate of about \$20 per square foot.³

Civil Rights District:

The City Center Master Plan proposed new residential development for the blocks to the north and west of Kelly Ingram Park. Potential projects suffered from the financial crisis of the Great Recession. However, projects to enhance or connect attractions in the area have been completed or are in the planning stages as of 2012.

³ Cushman & Wakefield *MarketBeat Office Snapshot: Birmingham, AL. Q1 2012.*



FIGURE 11.3

- Completion of the 588,000 sf Social Security Building in 2008, a LEED-certified building with a green roof and innovative stormwater management system.
- Treasury Building across the street from the Social Security Building.
- Completion of phase I of the civil rights heritage trail.
- Pedestrian bridge to link the 16th Street Corridor and Civil Rights Districts with Railroad Park. As of summer 2012, a feasibility study is underway.
- Renovation of the Carver Theater/Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame is listed as a phase 2 project in the 2012 capital projects bond.
- Proposal for a strategic plan for the Historic 4th Avenue North District and Urban Impact.

Entrepreneurial District:

The downtown master plan recognized this area as an existing focus area, anchored by the successful Innovation Depot. Downtown leaders are now looking to prepare the district to support expansion by “graduates” of the Innovation Depot, to attract other businesses, particularly knowledge industry firms, and provide improvements to serve the district.

- REV is developing a planning initiative for the Entrepreneurial District.
- Completion of the Intermodal Center will occur when the local match for federal funds is made available. This match is included in the proposed 2012 capital improvements bond referendum.

Parkside/Railroad Park:

The City Center Master Plan’s “Technology and Culture District” encompassed the Parkside subdistrict south of the park and the Entrepreneurial District north of the park with a vision of mixed use and potential UAB biotech development, and a revitalized Theater District. The Master Plan helped jump start planning and funding for the long-discussed park in downtown’s old railroad reservation and the park has become a centerpiece of the City’s strategy for downtown.

- Railroad Park opened in 2011. The 22-acre, \$23 million park is very successful.
- The 8,500 seat Regions Field baseball stadium on 1st Avenue South fronting Railroad Park opened in 2013, bringing minor league baseball back to the city, along with an adjacent Negro Leagues Museum.
- First Avenue South street improvements at Railroad Park are proposed for the 2012 capital improvements bond referendum.

UAB and Medical District:

UAB is recognized in the City Center Master Plan as a driver of the downtown economy whose building and urban design strategies have an important impact on downtown’s sense of place. The UAB Master Plan Update (2011) includes pedestrian connections to Railroad Park and Five Points South, as well as proposed housing adjacent to Parkside for UAB faculty and grad students. A new Children’s Hospital was completed in 2012.

Cultural and Entertainment (Five Points South):

Five Points South has had its ups and downs and appears to be on an upswing as of mid-2012 with the opening of new restaurants and other attractions. However, the physical condition of the public realm needs maintenance and upgrading, and business people are concerned about the potential to lose business when the BJCC entertainment district opens.



goal 1

Downtown is a thriving, mixed-use center of business, employment, institutions, and government.

POLICY

- Build on downtown's economic strengths as a center of health care, higher education, finance, and professional and technical services.

A key fact in creating a thriving downtown is to maintain and build on its particular strengths as a location of certain key industries within the larger region. Figures 11.5–11.10 indicate both the industries with the highest levels of downtown employment and the industries for which the downtown is most competitively positioned within the region.

The data identify four primary industry sectors that are both large employers and highly concentrated in downtown relative to the rest of the MSA. These are government (particularly state, including UAB, and local), health care (particularly hospitals), finance and insurance (both banks and other financial services), and professional, technical and scientific services (particularly legal, but also accounting and architecture). While too small and dispersed among industry categories to show up in the data, downtown also appears to be emerging as a competitive location for technology-based companies.

Some recent developments tend to reinforce this broad statistical picture. These include:

- A commitment by the federal government to locate more offices downtown as suburban leases expire. Most recently, the U.S. Treasury Department is moving its operations from Homewood to a new 3-story, \$19 million, 87,000-square-foot building next to the Social Security Building.
- One of the city's largest law firms, Maynard Cooper & Gale, announced plans for a \$1.13 million renovation of its downtown headquarters in the Regions Harbert Plaza, including leasing an additional floor to accommodate growth.

- BBVA Compass Bank is renovating the second floor of downtown Birmingham's Two North Twentieth in a \$1.4 million project to consolidate its human resources department and has also decided to retain the Daniels Building as its corporate headquarters.
- Plans by Southern Research Institute to build a new 40,000 square foot laboratory at its 9th Avenue South location.

A number of current or planned investments in cultural and entertainment amenities downtown should also help to increase the area's appeal to professional and technical workers. These include Regions Field baseball field, the proposed restoration of the Lyric Theatre, and the ongoing revitalization of 2nd Avenue North. These and other amenities that make downtown active and stimulating during and after work hours will be important to enhance downtown's ability to attract and retain key downtown industries.

STRATEGIES

A. Develop a marketing program targeted to industries for which downtown is already well-positioned or which have demonstrated growth potential.

Actions

1. **Target marketing and recruitment efforts to industries such as health care, life sciences, digital information and media, professional services (particularly legal), and tourism/hospitality.**

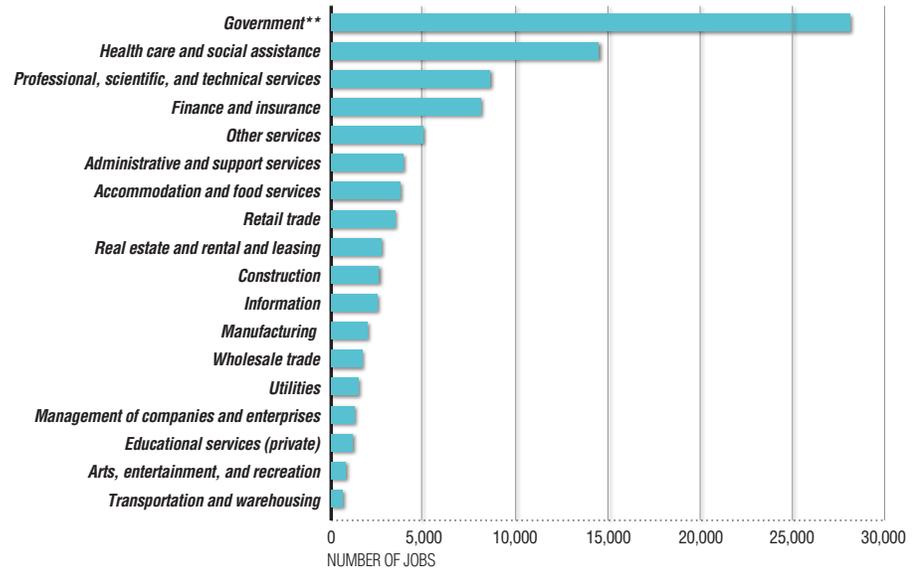
These are the industries for which the City of Birmingham is most competitive.

2. **Make improvements in the Entrepreneurial District to support new business uses in that area.**

See the discussion of an Entrepreneurial District Master Plan in Strategy B.

3. **Continue and enhance regular surveys of Innovation Depot and other startup firms' needs to encourage them to stay in downtown Birmingham.**

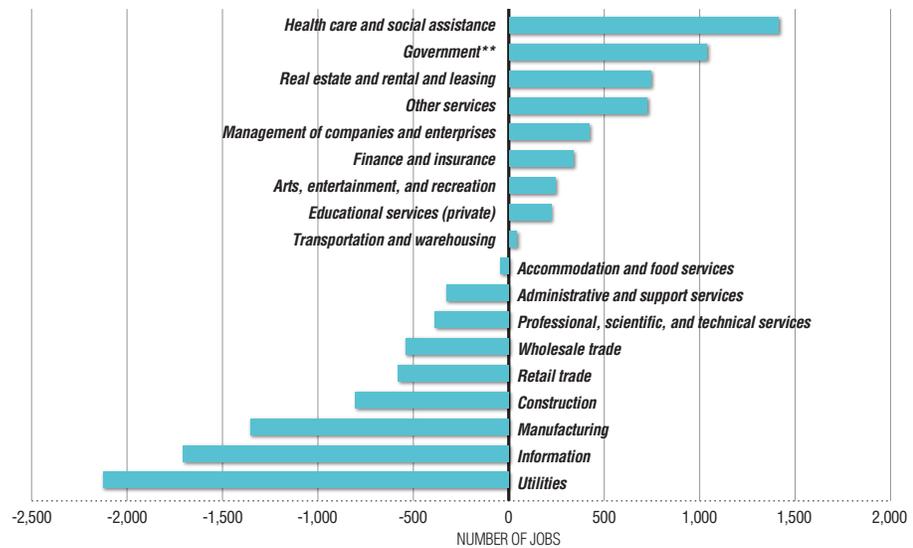
FIGURE 11.4: EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY, DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM* 2010



* Downtown is delineated by zip codes 35203, 35205, 35233, and 35294
 ** Government includes public education and health care

SOURCE: EMSI

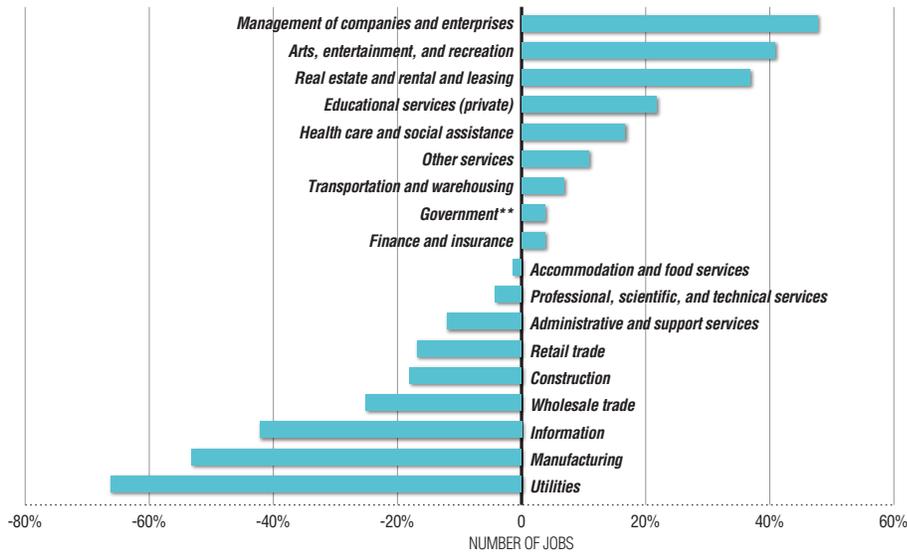
FIGURE 11.5: CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY, DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM* 2001-2010



* Downtown is delineated by zip codes 35203, 35205, 35233, and 35294
 ** Government includes public education and health care

SOURCE: EMSI

FIGURE 11.6: PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY, BIRMINGHAM* DOWNTOWN 2001–2010

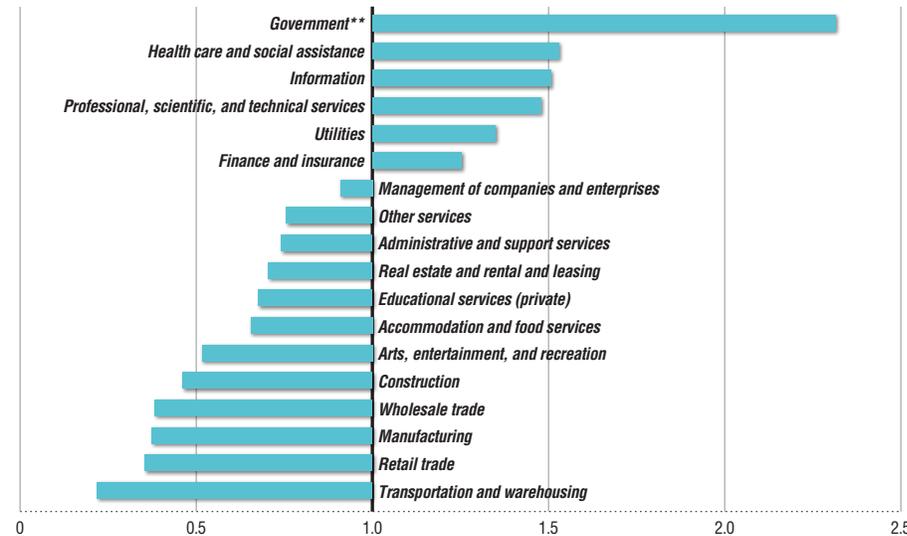


* Downtown is delineated by zip codes 35203, 35205, 35233, and 35294

** Government includes public education and health care

SOURCE: EMSI

FIGURE 11.7: LOCATION QUOTIENT, DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM* TO BIRMINGHAM MSA 2010

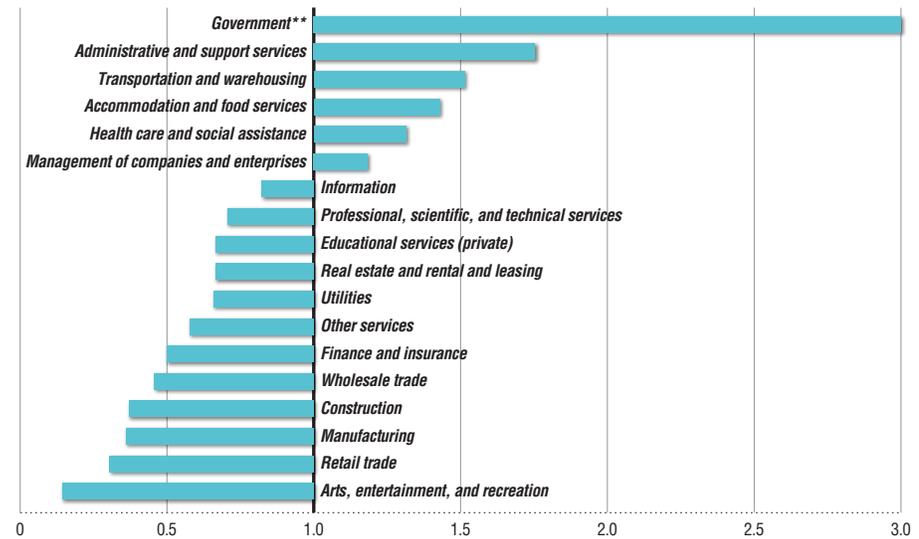


* Downtown is delineated by zip codes 35203, 35205, 35233, and 35294

** Government includes public education and health care

SOURCE: EMSI

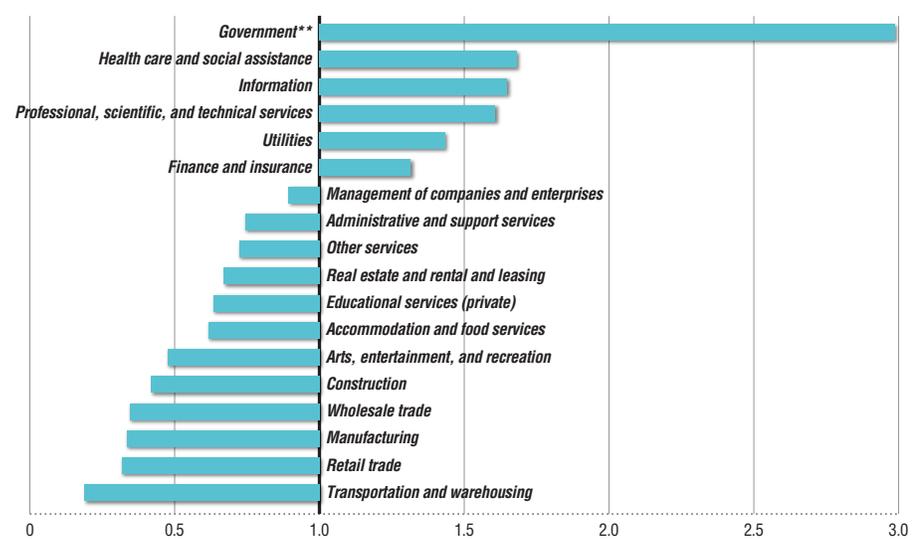
FIGURE 11.8: LOCATION QUOTIENT, DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM* TO REST OF CITY 2010



* Downtown is delineated by zip codes 35203, 35205, 35233, and 35294
 ** Government includes public education and health care

SOURCE: EMSI

FIGURE 11.9: LOCATION QUOTIENT, DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM* TO REST OF BIRMINGHAM MSA 2010



* Downtown is delineated by zip codes 35203, 35205, 35233, and 35294
 ** Government includes public education and health care

SOURCE: EMSI

B. Create a plan for the Entrepreneurial District.

With the opening of Railroad Park, construction of Regions Field, increasing success of the Innovation Depot, and growing number of technology and other knowledge industry businesses downtown, the Entrepreneurial District is ripe for a district plan. REV has begun discussions with stakeholders to develop a plan for the district. UAB and the Medical Center should be included as stakeholders in the plan even though they are not directly adjacent to the Entrepreneurial District. Successful centers of innovation around the country have typically emerged when nearby research institutions provide fertile soil for new enterprises.

Actions

1. Create a vision for a mixed use district.

Ideally the district should not only be a work district, but also contain live and play opportunities. A first step would be a survey of Innovation Depot companies and other knowledge industry businesses in downtown to find out where they live and what conditions would attract them to live in the Entrepreneurial District.

2. Create a program to prepare existing buildings and sites for new uses.

The program would include implementation of blight-elimination activities, starting with intensive code enforcement. Chapters 7 and 8 provide recommendations for a new, coordinated approach to code enforcement and blight reduction.

3. Create a database of properties and owners, and provide assistance in creating ready sites that are affordable to start up and early stage companies.

The Innovation Depot reports that graduating companies interested in staying downtown find it difficult to locate property owners and also that it is often too costly to renovate space, despite the lower property values in this part of downtown. The foundation of this database would be the comprehensive property information system recommended for the entire city in Chapter 8 (pp. 8.9–8.10). REV or the redevelopment authority also recommended in Chapter 8 (pp. 8.12–8.14) could assist in creating the ready buildings and sites needed.

4. Improve pedestrian and bicycle connections to Railroad Park.

The underpasses at 14th and 18th streets need to be made more attractive and secure. Public art projects that include light displays can be helpful in this regard, but upgrading materials and maintenance is also key. Although a pedestrian bridge may seem a good solution, bridges of this type also can have security issues, among other reasons because they must include elevators to meet ADA requirements.

5. Improve the pedestrian environment in the district.

Elements of this program would include enhanced streetscapes with more and better-maintained street trees, up-to-date drainage incorporating green approaches, and installing more and better lighting to enhance safety.

6. Develop a new branding strategy.

Some stakeholders do not like the “Entrepreneurial District” brand, which in any case is only used for street signs in the district. One possibility is “Innovation District,” which would clearly link the district with the successful Innovation Depot brand.



The Entrepreneurial District brand only appears on these street signs.

C. Continue to promote rehabilitation of distinctive historic structures and historic urban fabric that contribute to the character of downtown.

Action

1. Continue to market the use of tax credits and other incentives for adaptive reuse.

As of September 2012, the State of Alabama will offer New Market Tax Credits that can be used to assist businesses in qualified low-income areas and businesses. See Chapter 7 (p. 7.22) for more information on historic tax credits and incentives. REV, the City, and downtown developers should continue advocacy for a state historic tax credit.

D. Develop a program to address concerns about panhandling and similar issues working with CAP, the Police Department, and social services agencies.

Downtown districts often become a center for panhandling, activities by homeless persons without access to day shelters or who do not wish to use shelters, and petty crime that deters other users of the area. In many cases, the number of homeless is relatively small, but because there are few others on the street, their presence is more visible. Coordinated programs, standards for support activities (such as requiring that meal programs provide queuing areas inside or otherwise off the public street), as well as enforcement of existing city ordinances are needed. Downtown, some of the concerns focus on activities outside social service providers, many of whom are interested in working towards long term solutions. The Police and CAP can work with REV and service providers to focus on crime hotspots.

goal 2

Downtown is also a neighborhood that people in the city and the region experience downtown as a safe, fun, and exciting place to live.

POLICIES

- Continue to strengthen downtown as a lively residential neighborhood.
- Support a residential marketing plan to attract young professionals, downtown employees, new hires, and empty nesters with targeted messages.

STRATEGIES

A. Continue promoting the construction of new housing and adaptive reuse of older buildings for residential use, in order to strengthen downtown as a neighborhood.

More residents will make downtown more successful. While adaptive reuse is essential to preservation of downtown's historic character, new construction is also an important ingredient to offer a wide array of housing types and sizes.

Actions

1. Survey downtown employees about interest in living downtown and their housing needs.

This can be an expansion of the survey proposed for the Entrepreneurial District.

2. Update the downtown residential market study prepared in 2004 by Zimmerman/Volk Associates for the Center City Plan.

Changing economic conditions combined with the growth in the number of downtown residents will affect a new study of market potential.

3. Work with UAB and the Medical Center on developing housing for faculty and graduate students, employees and other affiliates downtown.

Direct development, partnerships with private developers, and employer-assisted homeownership programs are some of the ways that the institutions can help drive more residential growth in downtown Birmingham, including mixed-income housing.

4. Complete all phases of the Park Place HOPE VI development.

5. Provide gap financing, tax abatements for a specified period, or other incentives to help produce workforce housing and create housing in areas such as the Entrepreneurial District and the Civil Rights District.

6. Promote simple renovation of warehouse and light industrial space into live-work units.

Live-work units that tenants or owners can fit out themselves can be a cost effective way to attract more residents to downtown, particularly those who cannot afford units with higher-cost finishes.

B. Pursue aggressive code enforcement to ensure code compliance.

As noted earlier, recommendations for a coordinated code enforcement program for all parts of the city are discussed in Chapter 7 (pp. 7.30–7.31) and should also be employed downtown.

C. Create a vision and a plan for a mixed-use district in the southeast quadrant of downtown.

Similar to the Entrepreneurial District’s lack of a planning framework, the southeast quadrant of downtown needs a plan. This area, west of US 280, east of the Medical District and roughly between 2nd Avenue south and 10th Avenue south can become an important connector between the developing mixed-use district in Lakeview and the established downtown activity centers at Five Points South and the Medical District. While there is already some agreement on the potential role of the Entrepreneurial

District within downtown, the future of the southeast quadrant of downtown has not been a focus of attention. As downtown continues to develop, it is important to have a planning framework for this area in order to guide future changes.

Actions

1. Create a committee of stakeholders, led by REV-Birmingham, to identify issues and overall goals for an area plan.

The committee should include representatives of large and small property owners and business owners in the area; the Housing Authority; residents, including a resident representative of the public housing community; representatives of the development community; hospital representatives; the City’s Planning Division; and the Regional Planning Commission. If the proposed professional Redevelopment Authority is operating at this time, it should also be involved.

2. Prepare a request for proposals (RFP) for assistance in preparing the plan.

The plan should include development of a vision for the area within the context of the rest of downtown and Lakeview; residential and nonresidential market analysis; land use plan; urban design plan; transportation plan; and an implementation and financing plan.

D. Develop a marketing plan for downtown living that focuses on realtors and downtown employers, with specific strategies that target young professionals, new hires by downtown employers, and empty nesters.

Realtors can have a lot of influence in steering clients away from living in the city. Working with realtors and providing them with important information on downtown development, amenities, and safety can have long-term benefits. In addition, relationships with realtors can be a source of information about how their clients perceive living in the city. See the discussion about marketing Birmingham living in Chapter 7 (p. 7.18).

goal 3

Downtown has a diverse and contemporary mix of cultural, arts and entertainment venues to make Birmingham a center of southern culture and lifestyle.

POLICY

- Continue to strengthen downtown as the region's center of culture, the arts, and entertainment.

STRATEGIES

A. Extend the mission and accomplishments of the Civil Rights District and Institute to expand tourism, events, and conferences.

Actions

1. *Make the Civil Rights Institute a center for conferences and events around national and international human rights.*

Continue efforts to make the connection between Birmingham's civil rights history and broader human rights issues in the 21st century through establishing the Civil Rights Institute and Birmingham as a center of activity through conferences and events. The A.G. Gaston Motel could be renovated to serve those expanded activities.

2. *Consider new ways to bring Birmingham's civil rights history to life by updating and expanding digital and interactive resources and programs.*

Today, many people's first encounter with a museum or event center is through a web site, which should be well-maintained and up to date. Many museums have enhanced their exhibitions through providing downloadable podcasts for use at exhibits and along heritage trails, living history reenactments, and interactive exhibits. The cost of interactive exhibits has radically fallen with the invention of a small computer device called an "arduino," which can cost as little as thirty dollars.⁴

⁴ www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/arts/design/arduinoprovideinteractiveexhibitsforabout30.html

3. *Create a strategic plan for the 4th Avenue historic commercial district and Urban Impact, the nonprofit organization that manages it.*

Urban Impact, formed in 1980, has accomplished many of its original goals for the 4th Avenue district and needs a new strategic plan. It is conducting a capital improvement needs inventory and has discussed the need for a District Development, Improvement and Implementation Plan. Expanding that idea to create a new strategic plan for both the organization and the district would focus on including new and younger people in the organization, reviewing its mission, role and funding, and developing closer coordination with other downtown organizations.

B. Establish a Contemporary Culture District in what is today designated as the "Parkside/Railroad Park Extension" Focus Area.

The concept for this district is to build on the proposed greenway connection between the Sloss Furnace Historic Site and the proposed greenway link between Railroad Park and Sloss, to create an arts district focused on Southern contemporary art, design and crafts. Industrial buildings in the area could become exhibition, studio and live/work space for artists and artisans.



Railroad Park serves as a cultural venue as well as a green space.

Actions

1. Convene stakeholders to develop the district concept.

The Birmingham Cultural Alliance could lead the group, with Sloss Furnace, Birmingham Art Museum, Alabama School of Fine Arts, Alabama Jazz Museum, Railroad Park Foundation, design firms located in the area, and property owners as an initial group of stakeholders asked to participate. Ideas for discussion could include an annex of the Birmingham Art Museum for Southern contemporary art and fine crafts or a “Made in Alabama” retail site for fine crafts and informal performance venue. Potential groups that may be interested include the Southern Highland Craft Guild, which focuses on southern Appalachian crafts, and the Ogden Museum in New Orleans, which have retail stores that sell southern crafts and design. There is nothing similar in Alabama.

C. Expedite the revitalization of the Theater District and develop a plan to coordinate events and offerings in the district for maximum impact.

The centerpiece of Theater District revitalization is renovation of the Lyric Theater. The 2012 capital improvement bond includes \$1 million to match private fundraising. Other theaters include the Alabama Theater, across 3rd Avenue North from the Lyric, the Carver Theater on 4th Avenue North, and the IMAX Theater on the McWane Science Center.



SOURCE: JEFF ROBERTS,
BIRMINGHAM NEWS, AL.COM

To be really successful, the Theater District must be better connected to other parts of downtown, through streetscape improvements, enhanced lighting, and activation of empty ground floor spaces with art programs or similar efforts to create interest. To serve as anchors, theaters must also have a sufficient number of shows and events to attract a significant audience several days during the week along with restaurants or cafes to serve pre- and after-show customers.

Currently, the Theater District does not attract enough business to make it attractive to a restaurateur. It is not close enough to downtown residential areas to provide nearby customers. The Alabama Theater has a growing number of operating days (156 in 2012), but the area needs more activity and patrons on a regular basis, and the daytime employee base is also relatively small. The opening of the Uptown entertainment district may also make it more difficult for the Theater District to gain momentum, though the two districts are expected to have different kinds of entertainment options.

Many city centers have independent movie houses that specialize in second run and independent films and also have live shows and community events, like the Alabama Theater. Many can show different movies on multiple screens and they have also branched out into presenting film programs for special groups, such as Bollywood films for the South Asian immigrant community, or the Metropolitan Opera films. The Met series is currently shown at theaters in Hoover and Vestavia Hills.

Action

1. Convene a Theater District Working Group to identify opportunities for coordination.

Although the different theaters can sometimes be competing for the same audience, collaboration to raise the profile of the Theater District and to advocate for improvements that will benefit all the venues can help speed the revitalization of this area. REV and the Cultural Alliance can convene a Working Group to focus on branding; joint marketing of the district and in conjunction with others, such as downtown restaurants; identification of public improvements for connectivity and pedestrian-friendly environments; and so on.

D. Develop a marketing plan and events that target existing downtown employees and regional residents to participate in downtown activities after work and on weekends.

Many downtown employees have little relationship with the downtown outside their offices. They arrive and park in or close to their buildings, spend most of the day inside, and leave for the suburbs immediately after work.

Events just after work, such as concerts, could attract more of them to spend more time in the city. Providing discounts, promotions, or other marketing strategies could further entice employees to extend their time in downtown. The dispersed attractions in downtown Birmingham attract different age groups, so marketing needs to take into account when activities are most likely to be of interest to singles, families, older persons, and so on.

Action

1. Launch a program of events and promotions to attract downtown employees and regional residents to downtown.

REV and the Cultural Alliance, with its www.Birmingham365.org platform, as well as other partners such as the Railroad Park Foundation, can develop a pilot program, evaluate the result of that program, and then seek longer-term corporate and other support for a continuing program.

goal 4

Downtown is made up of connected and mutually reinforcing districts.

POLICIES

- Continue to strengthen the pedestrian-friendly character of downtown.
- Ensure strengthened connections for transit, pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists between north and south, and linking downtown and adjacent districts.
- Support a two-way street system downtown.
- Advocate for state support for the rerouting of I-20/59.
- Support new zoning for downtown districts to streamline approvals for desired development.

Although there are destinations and activities in each of downtown's districts, the pedestrian, bicycle or transit connections between them are typically quite weak or nonexistent. Pedestrian routes from one destination to another can go through blocks of empty storefronts and lack good lighting at night. There are no marked bicycle facilities on the streets and the one-way street pair system encourages higher vehicle speeds.

Current zoning in downtown, as defined for this plan, is predominantly B-4 Central Business District, M-1 Light Industry, and B-6 Health and Institutional. A multifamily zone (R-6) covers Park Place, and there are spots of the B-3 Community Business District at Five Points South, as well as small areas zoned for O & I Office and Institutional and even M-2, Heavy Industry. Most of downtown is subject to design review by the Design Review Committee and both administrative and design review is used to shape project outcomes in the M-1 zoning district.

STRATEGIES

A. Review and revise downtown zoning to tailor it to the desired results in each district in order to shorten the development approval process.

While most of downtown is subject to administrative review and design review, development of more targeted zoning can help move the permitting process along more efficiently. The current downtown zoning districts are extremely permissive, allowing for a large number of uses that are not desired under the Center City Plan or this Comprehensive Plan. Current zoning does not give a project proponent any idea of what is desired, though the City Center Master Plan includes some general design guidelines, should a project proponent consult the plan.

Zoning that establishes uses and design standards that are actually desired is much more effective, because a project proponent will understand how to go about designing the project to meet expectations. This can expedite the permitting process as time is not wasted on totally unacceptable options. An overlay district can be a stopgap measure to improve on the current system, but a complete rezoning of downtown would be the best solution.

Actions

1. *As an example of more targeted zoning, promote redevelopment of the high-value sites with frontage on Railroad Park with relatively dense, high value mixed use projects.*

Railroad Park is a great success. Half of the frontage on First Avenue South will be occupied by Regions Field and the Negro Leagues Museum. By early 2013, several residential projects had been announced for sites across from the park. Park frontage sites are among the best redevelopment sites in downtown Birmingham because of their proximity to the park.⁵ Locations a block or two away will also attract interest. Numerous studies have shown that values are higher the closer a property is to a park. It is likely that new development projects will arise for this area and it is important to make sure that any

development that occurs on those sites will effectively complement the park with designs that promote a lively public realm.

2. *Establish design standards for properties fronting on Railroad Park and within two full blocks of the park on all sides through a new zoning district or a Parkside Overlay District.*

REV worked with local architects and the City to create design guidelines and building concepts for the Railroad Park frontage (see sidebar on the following page). Buildings in the entire area are subject to review by the City's Design Review Committee, but establishment of design standards as an overlay in the zoning ordinance would communicate basic design requirements to project proponents from the beginning, expediting the review process. Some of the REV guidelines are suitable for a Parkside Overlay Zoning District, which would establish minimum design standards for the overlay area in order to create a lively, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly district with a lot of potential interaction with both Railroad Park and Regions Field, and provide incentives for additional desirable characteristics. Suggested design standards include:

- New construction to be at least 3 floors for the broader Parkside area (not just Railroad Park frontage).
- Ground floor active uses and at least 60% transparency.
- No blank walls or dark glass.
- All sides and areas of structures visible to the public treated with materials, finishes and architectural details appropriate to primary street-facing facades.
- Front doors aligned with pedestrian street crossings.
- Building line to the sidewalk unless there is a richly landscaped setback up to ten feet, or, pedestrian-oriented plaza or café space at the sidewalk.
- Parking, loading and building service areas located to the rear or in structures wrapped or buffered by building program.

⁵ <http://cityparkblog.org/tag/property-values/>

REV DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR RAILROAD PARK PROPERTIES

Four principles:

- 1) Make development compact, multi-use and pedestrian oriented
- 2) Aspire to “green” environmentally friendly standards
- 3) Accentuate primary entrances to the Railroad Park
- 4) Integrate and optimize on-site parking and access.

Provide Compact, Multi-Use, Pedestrian-Oriented Development

- New buildings to front and side lot lines to the extent practicable.
- New buildings fronting First Avenue South, between 14th and 18th Streets, at least five stories.
- Avoid single buildings occupying entire city blocks
- New buildings to include ground floor pedestrian-oriented uses with direct access to sidewalks on all frontages.
- No drive-through facilities.
- New buildings should contain multiple uses,
- At least two-thirds transparency of the ground floor facades

Aspire To Become A “Green Neighborhood”- Sustainable Development

- Developments are encouraged to meet LEED guidelines for sustainability.
- Building tenants are encouraged to LEED certify tenant spaces.

- Desired sustainability elements include (but are not limited to): green roofs/roof gardens; energy efficiency; rain-water capture for non-potable uses; heat island reduction; optimized daylighting; bicycle parking; and recycling.

Accentuate Primary Entrances

- Corner buildings should provide activity and vitality on each street frontage.
- Primary building entrances should be distinguishable from those of individual storefronts.
- Civic art, artistic crafting, and canopies and awnings should be used to emphasize building entrances.

Integrate and Optimize On-Site Parking and Access

- Parking should be located below grade or in interior courts. On-site parking should not be placed contiguous to public sidewalks.
- Parking structures should be distinguishable from inhabited buildings but compatible with the character of existing or proposed buildings.
- Integrated parking arrangements, including cross parking easements, are encouraged to optimize available parking for different peak hour demands.
- Alleys should be preserved and maintained for access for both entry and service where practical.
- Driveways should not be on First Avenue South.

Source: <http://www.yourcitycenter.com/Home.aspx?ContentID=872>

- Allowance for off-site parking in shared parking areas.
- Preservation of alleys.
- Incentives for additional floor(s) if any of the following are included:
 - > Systematic green stormwater management through a green roof or upper floor garden, rain gardens, and other measures.
 - > Building meets or exceeds LEED Silver standards.
 - > In residential projects, 10% affordable housing units indistinguishable from market rate units (affordable to households at or below 80% of area median income, which is the median for the entire region, not the city alone).

B. Create and implement an enhancement and management plan for Five Points South.

Five Points South, with its concentration of nationally-recognized restaurants and other attractions, is the southern anchor of downtown. New, locally owned restaurants and businesses have opened in late 2011 and early 2012, but the public realm is faded and needs maintenance and upgrading, and vacant storefronts are evident in the gateway approach on 20th Street South. Conditions in the parking garage may be a deterrent to some. The area needs an enhanced Main Streets-style management program.

Actions

1. **Repair and maintain the public realm and provide new signage and wayfinding.**
2. **Work with property owners and brokers to recruit new businesses to empty storefronts and restaurants.**
3. **Market the Five Points South attractions to convention visitors and baseball fans, and provide transportation options.**

Some of the city's most well-known restaurants are in the Five Points South area. It is crucial that the area be marketed and connected to the new Uptown entertainment district under development at the convention center and to Regions Field.

4. **Explore expansion of CAP to Five Points South.**

Five Points South should be considered the southern anchor of downtown. The public realm in the district is faded and would benefit greatly from CAP support.

C. Work closely with UAB to ensure coordinated action to accelerate downtown revitalization, especially in the Parkside and Entrepreneurial Districts.

UAB's ten year master plan update envisions an additional 7,000 students and more than 5,700 jobs. Initiatives to connect UAB with other parts of downtown and to embed it in the city's urban fabric include:

- Connect to Railroad Park by extending the Campus Green via 15th Street South.
- Connect with Five Points South by a walkway stretching southeast from the Campus Green.
- Provide housing for university affiliates on 4th Avenue South.
- Locate support functions to buildings on streets in the "Midtown" area close to Parkside but not fronting on the park itself.
- Make the entire campus more walkable and provide a campus transit system—to increase the permeability of the campus.

FIGURE 11.11: FUTURE UAB DISTRICTS



Future UAB districts in its 2011 master plan update support revitalization in the Parkside or "Midtown" area. Source: UAB.

- UAB's importance to the city cannot be underestimated and it is critical that it be included in a wide range of initiatives to improve and promote downtown.

Actions

1. **Create a regular meeting process for UAB and the City's Planning Division.**

REV Birmingham has regular meetings with UAB. The City's Planning Division should also have direct discussions—at least quarterly—with UAB. The Chief Planner should request a quarterly meeting or telephone call with the UAB Executive Director for Campus Planning to make sure that the City keeps abreast of UAB thinking on implementation of their master plan and so that the university is aware of City priorities and planning activities. This contact could be incorporated into the existing meetings that REV holds with UAB.

2. **Establish a system for an annual presentation by UAB on its physical planning and implementation activities to the Birmingham City Planning Commission.**

Planning staff should work with the Commission to create a series of questions for UAB responses at an annual meeting of the Commission that will help the City and the community understand the university's role as a physical presence in the city and its plans for the future.⁶

⁶ The Town-Gown Reports to the Planning Board in Cambridge, MA, provide a model for this kind of activity. <http://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/planud/institutionalplanning/recenttowngown.aspx>

D. Create and implement a Downtown Connections Plan that includes a combination of streetscape improvements, street tree planting, recruitment of businesses for ground floor vacancies, wayfinding, activities to mitigate vacancies, and improvements to enhance the perception of safety.

Participants in public meetings repeatedly emphasized the need to connect the various activity areas in downtown more effectively by improving pedestrian conditions.

Actions

1. Identify connectivity needs and focus improvements on these segments.

The best way to identify needs is to survey people who use the various destinations and find out where they are willing to walk now, where they tend to drive between destinations even though the distance is walkable, and where they think they would walk if conditions were better. A program of public art focused on drawing people through connections could also create interest and excitement.

Areas needing special attention include:

- The pedestrian underpasses at 14th, 18th, 19th, and 20th Streets.
- Connections between the Theater District, 20th Street North, and the 2nd Avenue North restaurant district.
- Connections between the Uptown entertainment district and Five Points South.
- Connections between Five Points South and UAB.

2. Pursue implementation of the Park to Sloss connection to extend the greenway.

The local Rotary Club is planning to undertake this project.

3. Design and implement a branding and wayfinding program for downtown and its subdistricts.

Clear signage and orientation helps people understand where destinations are located and encourages them to walk between destinations.



San Antonio's pedestrian wayfinding system uses these medallions attached to light posts to effectively orient pedestrians.

4. Design and construct streetscape improvements for important linkage segments.

Safe, attractive and well-cared for streetscapes encourage walking.

5. Organize temporary uses, artist displays and performances to activate vacant ground floor uses in important linkage areas.

Empty storefronts and ground floor uses make pedestrians feel insecure. Programs to activate empty storefronts and the street with art, pop-up shops, and other temporary solutions create interest and, if they are regularly changed, can also attract people to make multiple trips. The storefront artist programs have been successful in cities like San Francisco, Seattle, Santa Barbara, and various cities in Massachusetts. Art directly on the sidewalk, from footsteps organized in dance steps to 3-D drawings, can help draw people along streets that otherwise lack interest.

6. Consider a One Percent for Art program for downtown improvements to the public realm.

One Percent for Art programs set aside one percent of public infrastructure projects over a certain budget threshold for public art projects. Streetscape and road projects in downtown that enhance connectivity would be particularly suitable for this kind of program because of the need to create pedestrian interest in the areas between activity centers.

“Light Channels” by San Antonio artist Bill Fitzgibbons transformed two highway underpasses with interactive light art.



Source: <http://billfitzgibbons.com/portfolio/3/>

In addition, art projects can enhance problematic locations, such as the historic pedestrian underpasses linking the north and south parts of downtown.

E. Develop alternatives to the car as the preferred method to travel in downtown.

Actions:

- 1. Implement the proposed transit circulator to serve residents, commuters, and visitors or explore the potential of a downtown transportation management association supported by the university, major employers, and entertainment district business associations to provide shuttle transit around downtown, with service available to the public.**

At the time of writing, there are multiple proposals for downtown circulators serving different groups and the public, including a UAB shuttle, a tourist shuttle serving the Uptown entertainment complex, a business-supported shuttle, and improved DART trolley service. A proposal to enhance downtown transit as well as access from southern bedroom communities called the In-Town Transit Partnership has not been funded and does not appear to have a champion. A downtown Transportation Management Association (TMA) could be a better solution. Transportation management associations are voluntary groups in which public and private

organizations cooperate to provide programs to enhance mobility in a particular area (usually a job center).

- 2. Create well-marked bicycle routes and provision for secure bike parking.**

In the longer term, a rental bike system, like the ones implemented in a number of cities in the US and around the world, would create a new approach to getting around downtown. The Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System plan provides guidance for bicycle routes. See Chapter 12 (pp. 12.26–12.29) for a discussion of “mode-priority” streets.

- 3. Make pedestrian conditions comfortable and safe in all seasons of the year.**

While Birmingham does have a few months of chilly weather, the main seasonal deterrent to walking is heat. Street trees that provide shade at maturity (i.e., not ornamental trees like crape myrtle which do not provide much shade) are the best way to mitigate heat, so long as the root systems do not interfere with building foundations and so long as the tree crown does not interfere with utility lines. Encouraging awnings, porticos and other shade elements in buildings is also important.

- 4. Extend the CAP program to additional parts of downtown as revitalization takes hold and add street beats or a presence of police for enhanced pedestrian safety.**

Although the CAP program provides security and assistance in parts of downtown, the potential to expand it to other areas should be explored. Moreover, the visible presence of police officers on

A TMA OPEN TO CITY RESIDENTS

An interesting model for downtown Birmingham is the Charles River TMA, which, among other things, operates a shuttle service between job centers in the technology-rich eastern part of Cambridge, MA, and a transit station in Boston. Like other TMAs, it is supported by private businesses and institutions. The city became a member and worked with the TMA to create a program whereby ordinary citizens can ride the shuttle for \$1.

www.charlesrivertma.org/index.htm

the street or on bicycles adds to the perception and reality of safety. The existing police substation at Five Points South is one model.

F. Implement the plan for two-way streets downtown.

Two-way streets will slow traffic and provide a better environment for downtown development. A feasibility study already exists for converting selected streets into two-way. A pilot project to begin implementing the plan could be tried out during the I-20/I-59 deck replacement project.

G. Ensure that new public buildings, such as a potential police headquarters, or public offices moving to existing buildings are located to promote connectivity and to serve as anchors in downtown districts.

Public buildings are important anchors that bring people to downtown. Consideration of how public offices can contribute to the Downtown Connections Plan and help create a critical mass of activity should be part of any evaluation of locations for public offices.

H. Advocate with state transportation officials for the rerouting of I-59/I-20 to better link the convention center and new entertainment district with the rest of downtown.

See Chapter 12, p. 12.32.

goal 5

Downtown has a strong leadership organization active in planning, promotion, recruitment, development, and public realm.

POLICIES

- Support a consistent financing plan for REV Birmingham.
- Continue to work on implementation of the 2004 Center City Master Plan, with adjustments as appropriate.
- Review downtown neighborhood-organization boundaries in light of the growing number of downtown residents.

STRATEGIES

A. Develop a financing plan for REV that provides a consistent level of support and ensure that REV can continue to lead downtown if it adds more responsibilities.

As noted earlier, unlike CAP, REV does not have a dedicated and consistent funding source. As of 2012, the merger of Operation New Birmingham with Birmingham Main Streets brings more responsibilities, and there is increasing pressure for REV to take on new responsibilities in city revitalization. New responsibilities require more staff and funding.

Potential funding sources include raising the downtown assessment (which has not changed since 1995) to support REV's leadership and management role downtown, perhaps also making CAP an arm of REV; raising funds through the Parking Authority, which also has extremely low parking fees; creation of a catalyst development fund, supported by corporate investments, to operate REV and promote strategic development in downtown and Main Streets districts.

B. Change neighborhood association boundaries to reflect residents’ identification with downtown as a place.

People who live within the downtown area as defined for this plan see themselves as residents of Center City. However, parts of the downtown are included in neighborhood associations of predominantly residential areas outside the downtown, such as Fountain Heights. These association boundaries were established when downtown had few residents and should be adjusted to reflect recent changes.

C. Getting Started

| ACTIONS | RESPONSIBLE PARTY |
|--|---|
| Develop an industry marketing initiative tailored to industries most critical to downtown development. | REV; Mayor’s Office of Economic Development |
| Develop a program with major employers to market downtown living to realtors and new hires. | REV; Realtor’s Association; major employers |
| Create a plan for the Entrepreneurial District. | REV; stakeholders |
| Create a program to address concerns about panhandling and similar issues. | REV; CAP; social services agencies; Police Department |
| Review and revise downtown zoning. | Planning Division; REV; downtown stakeholders |
| Create a Downtown Connections plan. | Planning and other divisions of PEP; REV |
| Create a plan for consistent funding for REV Birmingham. | REV; Mayor’s office; corporate supporters |
| | |